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# Experiences in the Friends' Ambulance Unit

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# Experiences in the Friends' Ambulance Unit

Taken from *We Did Not Fight 1914-18: Experiences of War Resisters*, edited by Julian Bell (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1935), pp. 359-374

The story that I have to tell is not one of heroic war resistance for the sake of a clearly apprehended ideal. It is a story of long and inconclusive heart-searching, of a deeply felt conflict of loyalties, and of a compromise which, though perhaps inglorious, was, I believe, at least an honest attempt to do justice to both claims as they were felt at that time by a thoroughly bewildered young man.

I gave little thought to the problem of war till war was actually spreading over Europe. I spent the winter of 1914-15 taking W.E.A. tutorial classes. Like so many others I loathed the war and at the same time felt an increasingly urgent call to be doing something about it. I determined to finish my job, and then in the spring, if there was still a war — what? With no enthusiasm I did the obvious thing; I applied for a commission. The relief of the decision was spoilt by a vague but deep sense of betrayal. Betrayal of what? Surely, as everyone said, we must protect our country and our homes from a ruthless enemy. And yet —!

I awaited the official call. Nothing happened. The army seemed in no hurry to have me. My impatience grew; but at the same time I began to realise less obscurely that this war was a gigantic piece of folly, and that the terrible power of it lay simply in the fact that we all accepted it as inevitable. Contemplation of the little red hand-book on infantry training, talk with men home from the front, and with pacific folk, and also distressing arguments with civilian militarists, increased my distress without bringing clear conviction, one way or the other.

I heard of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, an organisation of young Quakers who wished to carry on the great tradition of their faith by serving the wounded under fire while refusing to bear arms or submit to military discipline. That sounded like the real thing. It also offered a quick route to the front. Though not myself a member of the Society of Friends I had a deep respect for its tradition of pacifism and social service.

The stricter Friends, it seemed, rejected even the work of the F.A.U. That was their affair. For my part I had not the heart to stand aside any longer, and yet I had not the conviction to be a soldier. Indeed, if I had enlisted, I should have done so for no honourable motives but simply for herd-approval. Conclude, if you will, that the wielders of white feathers drove me to take up the best imitation of military service that conscience (or sheer funk) would tolerate. To myself the situation presented itself otherwise. Somehow I *must* bear my share of the great common agony. To refuse it entirely, even though the war could bring no good to Europe, seemed at that time base. Yet by now it was becoming clear to me that I

must not enlist. For it was the universal acquiescence in the call to arms which made war possible. And though England and France were indeed in danger, so was Germany. And the gravest danger, I now obscurely felt, was the destruction not of national states but of civilisation itself.

I had no belief that killing, simply as such, must in all circumstances be wrong. It was war, modern war, that was wrong, and foolish, and likely to undermine civilisation: It was nationalism that was wrong; and militarism, and the glib surrender of one's moral responsibility to an authority that was not really fit to bear it.

In the spring of 1915 I had acute appendicitis, and after the operation I was laid up for six weeks. When I was fit again, I joined the F.A.U. at Dunkirk with a car fitted as a motor ambulance. Thenceforward, till the end of the war, I served in the "Unit" in various regions of Belgium and France. Again and again throughout that time I was tormented by one or other of the two conflicting impulses, either to go home and enlist, or, when conscription had come, to go home to prison. But in fact, lacking conviction for either course, I did neither. I simply carried on with the job in hand, which was a solid straight-forward job, and obviously had to be done by someone.

To the argument that thereby one helped the military machine, I answered that no doubt one did, but that primarily what one was doing was helping human beings in distress. To the argument that in taking on this comparatively safe work one was driving some other fellow out of the safe zone into the trenches, I answered that I was ready to do stretcher-bearing in the front line if they would let me. Unfortunately this turned out to be impossible, save for men under military discipline. And military discipline, the shirking of moral responsibility, I must not accept. Alas! As the war years advanced, it became increasingly difficult to persuade oneself that one *had* rejected military discipline. But in a way one really had. Up to a point of course we did as the French army told us, but sometimes we found it necessary to be unaccommodating. For instance, when the motor convoy of which in due course I became a member was told to carry men or ammunition up to the front, it refused. Thereby we risked what, for us, was a very serious penalty. We risked losing all further opportunity of working at the front.

To all arguments against the F.A.U. I am inclined to say finally this. Yes, it was an attempt to have the cake and eat it, to go to war and be a pacifist. Its basis was perhaps illogical; but it was a sincere expression of two overmastering and wholesome impulses, the will to share in the common ordeal and the will to make some kind of protest against the common folly. And after all, if all men had been ready to serve the Red Cross, but not to fight, there would have been no war. Still, the F.A.U. was indeed a compromise, an expression of minds whose allegiance was

divided. All honour to those single-minded pacifists who rejected the F.A.U. in favour of prison, but some of us in those days would have felt as great a sense of betrayal in prison as in the trenches. Hence the "Unit."

Never before had such a strange hybrid of pacifism and militarism existed. Never again, surely, will such a thing be permitted. We were dressed in semi-military uniforms, and in the early phase we wore the officer's type of tunic. When at last we were told to wear closed collars, some of us were already so infected by the military environment that this change distressed us. On the other hand we were quite unmilitary in spirit and internal discipline. We were a bunch of young men who had agreed to pull together in order to do a certain job of work. Punishment, so far as I know, never occurred in the Unit, certainly never in our convoy. Rules were kept because everyone knew that rules were necessary. Public opinion alone was enough to enforce them. When they tended to become excessive or petty-fogging, protest was made, and the whole matter was discussed. It was inevitable that friction should sometimes occur between leaders and the rest of us. Our "officers" had indeed a difficult and thankless task, for we were perhaps unduly prone to suspect them of striving for discipline for discipline's sake, especially during long spells of dull routine work far behind the front. There was much "hate" over what was regarded as an excessively high standard of car-cleaning. *Why*, we protested, I think with some reason, should we have to spend so much time lying on our backs cleaning crank-cases and undershields? Such over-scrupulous cleanliness could not increase our efficiency. But in periods of action and danger it never occurred to anyone to protest or shirk.

In its earliest phase the F.A.U. had earned a reputation for courage and resourcefulness. By the time I joined it the romantic period was over. The "Unit" was settling down to routine work with the Belgian and French armies. It had hospitals of its own, ambulance trains, a large fleet of cars and a repair garage. Its personnel consisted mostly of Quakers, but not entirely. Peace-time occupations had been very diverse. There were boys fresh from Quaker schools and eager for adventure. There were young business men, artists, writers, teachers, mechanics, shop-assistants, artisans. Some were ardent Christian pacifists who refused to disobey the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Some based their pacifism on broader grounds. Some were in the "Unit" out of deference to their Quaker upbringing. Some were simply young men in a hurry to take part in the war without the tedium of military training.

For a while I worked at the base in Dunkirk. To be merely transporting wounded from hospital to hospital in and around the town was not satisfying. When in due course I was sent to an out-station near the front, it seemed that I was at last up against the real thing. Occasional shelling afforded the required sense of danger, though indeed to the old hand these stray shells were of no account. Then there was the night-

driving without lights on roads pitted with shell-holes and crowded with troops and vehicles. Every bump called forth cries from the suffering men within the car. Compassion only made matters worse; for it interfered with one's driving, so that the wounded suffered all the more. In time, of course, one grew accustomed to groaning and heavily-bandaged men with blood-soaked clothes. One grew callous, if you like, able to attend to the job in hand without being distracted by sounds of agony within the car, and the frequent appeal, "Doucement, doucement."

As the novelty of driving at the front wore off, one could not help realising that after all it was very sheltered, very "embusqué" work, although exacting and sometimes alarming. When one of our little party at an out-station was killed (a light-hearted boy who used to enjoy wearing a Belgian képi with a jaunty tassel) the tragedy was more like an accident than one of the inevitable casualities of war.

In 1916 the motor convoy of which I was a member was reorganised, re-equipped, and sent far away to the South. Our official designation was "Section Sanitaire Anglaise Treize" (S.S.A. 13). We were now a thoroughly efficient section. Our cars were uniform and eminently suitable to the work. In addition to twenty ambulances we had a mobile workshop, a soup-kitchen, a lorry, a tourer. There were about forty-five of us, a very heterogeneous crowd. Some had been out almost since the beginning of the war. Some had only arrived since conscription; most were neither veterans nor novices. Like the rest of the Unit we were of many social classes, but class-distinctions were fairly thoroughly ignored. Inevitably we formed ourselves into cliques of which the most prominent were those who affected art and literature and those who, in revulsion, affected to be worldly-wise. But in spite of internal differences the Convoy became in time a definite single entity with a common purpose and tradition, and considerable "esprit de corps." The common purpose was dominated by the desire to undertake arduous work at the front. The tradition included a degree of efficiency and conscientiousness which was rooted in the ideology of Quakerism, and often surprised the French. Conscientiousness was doubtless fomented by the ever-present horror of being considered "embusqué." Further, though in theory we were emancipated from mere patriotism, many of us were in fact intensely conscious of our nationality and anxious to uphold its honour in the eyes of the French. For our journey south took us far from all traces of the British Army. Henceforth we were to come across Italians, Senegalese, Algerians, Annamites, American negroes, Russians, but no British.

For many months we were stationed far behind the lines at Compiègne. We were kept busy, but this safe routine work was not the sort of thing we wanted. All the same, there were compensations. The town was unharmed and full of life. There were shops, historic palaces, and the ancient royal forest, criss-crossed with long, straight "allées." There we

walked and discussed modern art and Bergson and Bertrand Russell. Often we slept out on stretchers, under the trees and stars. This was all very well, but: we were dealing with the wounded; and they were a constant reproach to us, for we ourselves were scandalously “embusqué.” We grew more and more discontented and peevish.

At last came the order to move, and once more the procession of twenty-four cars trailed through France. This was the winter of 1916-17. The temperature sank to -15°C. I used to sleep out in a “tourer” that I was driving at this time. A suitcase formed part of my bed. In the suitcase was a bottle of ink. It froze under me. Everything froze, the wine, the bread, our boots. Before the winter was over we joined the Sixteenth Division of the French Army, with which we worked henceforth till the end of the war in various parts of Champagne, Argonne and Lorraine. Our life now consisted of spells at the front and periods of rest far behind the lines. At first the sectors allotted to us were quiet, though occasional “coups de main” necessitated spells of violent activity.

We became popular with the Division. Officers and men regarded us as amiable and efficient cranks. They were particularly amused because we wore shorts throughout the summer, and drank less than our ration of wine. Our pacifism was put down to some eccentricity of religion. We discussed it freely, and were treated with respect, sympathy and almost complete incomprehension. To these Frenchmen the supreme value was France. Nothing else counted. And France was in danger.

When we were off duty, we walked on the bare hills or through the forest, or gathered apples in deserted orchards, or ate “gauffres” and honey in Ste. Menehould, or bathed, or sat in one another’s cars discussing the universe or the “sacrée guerre” and pacifism.

In the spring of 1917 we moved off with our Division to take part in the projected great offensive in front of Reims. Long before we reached our destination it was obvious that we were “for it “ this time. Everywhere there were troops, guns, lorries. The roads were packed. I shall not forget the strange blend of exaltation and fright in which I made that journey. And beneath it all was the shameful fact that however bad our fate, the fate of the infantry would be far worse. But what had *I* to do with all this? It wasn’t *my* affair. Why hadn’t I gone home and to a safe prison, instead of dabbling in this war that wasn’t *my* war at all? Why didn’t the troops just down tools and walk home? No one on either side wanted to be in it. But no one dared take the first move. And, if they had, no one else would have followed. It was all hopeless. Well, the Convoy had wanted a chance to prove to itself that its pacifism wasn’t just funk. The chance was coming.

The Convoy took up its position at the foot of the Montagne de Reims. For many days we had little more than ordinary routine work but our village was fairly constantly shelled. From the Montagne we could watch

an immense stretch of the front undergoing a preliminary bombardment. At last the attack began. All our cars were now continuously in service; but though two French motor sections had come up to help us, it was quite impossible to cope with the multitude of wounded. Crowds of them had to drag themselves along the heavily shelled road on foot. Wounded Germans also came pouring in, their grey coats covered with blood.

A single narrow road served our sector. Along it swarmed troops, guns, limbers, tanks and ambulances. There was one particularly bad stretch where the road passed a battery concealed in a wood. Here horses were put to the gallop and ambulances floundered hurriedly among the shell-holes regardless of the cries of their suffering cargo. Once when I was on this stretch, following a galloping limber, a shell landed on the limber and the road was immediately blocked with a confusion of splintered wood and the bodies of horses and men. Our people had to clear the way for the cars, thereby inadvertently assisting the French Army. We were now beginning to have our own casualties, and losing cars. After twenty-four hours of this sort of thing nerves began to give out. At least, I speak for myself. Everybody else seemed so damnably calm. I began to wonder how much more I could stand. Yet deep down in my mind, and difficult to introspect, was a strange quietness, an aloof delight. Odd, to be terrified and yet at peace!

Unexpectedly there was a lull. Some of us spent a whole night squatting in a ditch waiting for work, while shells whined overhead in both directions. There had been no advance. Instead (we were told) there had been mutiny on the part of our Division and a Russian regiment. The attack, it seems, had been badly mismanaged, and the troops had finally refused to allow more lives to be thrown away uselessly. The Division was withdrawn. We accompanied it into a delightful countryside gay with flowers. Tin hats and gas masks were discarded.

Well, we had had a taste of it all right, quite as much as some of us wanted. But what was this sort of thing compared with the lot of the infantry? The Division had been “decimated.” The Convoy, though most of us had had plenty of “miraculous “ escapes, had come through with very few casualties.

A queer thing now happened to us. The Convoy was cited in the orders of the Corps d’ Armée, no mean distinction. This entitled it to have the Croix de Guerre painted on every car. Several individual members also were awarded the cross. By now we were so deeply infected with the military spirit that many of us were more elated to think that the army respected us than disconcerted at the incongruity of pacifists with military decorations. Since those days some of us have changed!

After a period of rest the Division took over a quiet sector south of Verdun, and subsequently returned to its old haunt in Champagne. Here

there was steady routine work, varied with short, sharp “coups de main.” All the convoy’s members took turns at the various “postes de secours.” In quiet times this might mean that driver and orderly would spend a peaceful few days by themselves in some hut or dugout with never an interruption. There was plenty of time for talk and reading, for sketching and letter-writing. I remember many a pleasant meal with the French “brancardiers” in a certain dug-out. The food, being French, was excellent. “Singe” (ration meat) and vegetables were marvellously transformed. There was delicious dandelion salad. Our popularity at these meals was partly due to the fact that few of us drank our full share of ration wine, and still fewer took the coveted rum-ration which so greatly enhanced the coffee.

These meals were often taken in company with one of the Division’s chaplains, a tall priest in a black cassock. M. l’Abbé Saglio was interested in the Friends, and eager to discuss pacifism. Many a long talk did we have over coffee (with or without rum), struggling to express in our blundering French all sorts of ideas which were often not at all clear in our own minds. The Abbé took his own work very seriously. I remember the tenderness with which on one occasion he complied with a dying man’s request, “Embrassez moi, M. l’Abbé.” I remember the genuine respect with which the “poilus” talked of him. He spent much of his time with them in the trenches. I once saw him tramping toward the front with haggard face, clutching a little book and muttering prayers. This was at the beginning of our second battle. Later in the same battle his leg was smashed by a shell. Some days afterwards we saw him in hospital, smiling and peaceful. Later, we heard, he had somehow been neglected and had died.

Our second battle was a brief German attack. During the preliminary bombardment I spent a night in a certain dug-out with an English companion and a number of French “brancardiers.” There was an almost continuous thud of shells overhead. Our French colleagues kept up an agitated conversation all night. I lay in a bunk trying to sleep, hoping there wouldn’t be a call, and trembling so violently that the wire mattress creaked. Next morning it turned out that my companion had slept solidly and heard nothing of the bombardment.

The attack began, and once more we were all working night and day. As usual there was one particularly bad stretch of road, constantly shelled. It was here that I left a wounded man by the road-side. I was going up with an empty car. Shells were landing all round. One was near enough to shift the car sideways. In the ditch was a man with a smashed head, obviously dead. I drove on at top speed, crashing into shell holes. The next car that came along stopped during heavy shell-fire and picked him up. He was alive. That was a pretty bad mistake on my part, not easily forgotten.

Very soon we went into “repos” again, and nothing further happened

to us till once more we travelled (with our Division) to the neighbourhood of Reims, and spent the last three months of the war in continuous violent activity, culminating in the final advance. This last quarter of a year was our most trying time. But in retrospect it has become as confused as a bad dream, though relieved by poignant impressions of the beauty of nature. One seemed even to catch surprising glimpses of a kind of superhuman beauty in the hideous disaster of war itself.

A plague of flies gave us all “trench fever,” and reduced our numbers to half the normal strength. Those who remained were always cursed with diarrhoea, and always dog-tired with the constant strain and work. Drivers sometimes fell asleep at the wheel. Roads at the front, of course, were very badly smashed. There was a good deal of gas; and gas-masks do not conduce to good driving, least of all at night. As something of a fresh-air fiend, I violently loathed sleeping behind a gas-proof curtain. Once, when no dug-out or cellar was available, some of us slept in an old pig-stye. In the morning some French engineers came to bury us, supposing us to be corpses.

As usual we were extraordinarily free from casualties. Only one of our remaining active members was killed; but he, Colin Priestman, was one whom we could ill afford to lose.

The actual advance took place through devastated country over corduroy roads and pontoon bridges. The villages were all destroyed, some completely obliterated. Some were smouldering ruins. In one village we came upon a rough notice in German to the effect that the library must be treated with respect, since books are men’s best friends. Of the library itself there was no trace.

A few days before the armistice our Division was withdrawn. We retired to Ay. When the armistice was declared I was sent with a companion to raid the deserted wine-cellars of Reims for the Convoy’s armistice celebrations. We collected, if I remember rightly, about forty bottles of champagne, but before we had stowed them in the car, two “flicks” (military gendarmes) appeared, and we had to retreat empty-handed and in haste. Fortunately the mayor of Ay presented the Convoy with more than enough wine for its carousal. I hope the Friends will forgive me for recording this significant little incident which crowned the long and strange career of S.S.A. 13.

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